

WASHINGTON, D.C.--As the conversation about health care reform continues, Representative Xavier Becerra (CA-31), Vice Chair of the House Democratic Caucus and senior member of the Ways and Means Committee, U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman (NM) and Representative Lloyd Doggett (TX-25) introduced legislation to ensure that millions of low-income elderly and disabled Americans get the extra help they need at a cost they can afford.

The lawmakers today introduced legislation in the House of Representatives and the Senate aimed at making improvements to "Medicare Savings Programs" and the Part D Low-Income Subsidy, which help Medicare recipients defray the cost of their Medicare premiums, cost-sharing, and prescription drugs at a time when this extra help is vital.

The bills have been endorsed by numerous advocacy groups, including AARP, Families USA, Consumers Union, the Center for Medicare Advocacy, the Medicare Rights Center, the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, the National Council on Aging, and the National Senior Citizens Law Center.

"When you live on a limited income like so many of the Medicare beneficiaries do, every penny counts," Rep. Becerra said. "Our bill makes long overdue improvements to the Medicare Savings Program and provides additional assistance to seniors for their health care out-of-pocket expenses, preventing them from having to choose between buying food and paying for the health care services they need."

"In these difficult economic times, many low-income seniors are already having trouble meeting their basic needs of food and housing. Their difficulties are only compounded by the need for basic health care coverage," Bingaman said. "Our goal with this legislation is to make it easier for low-income Medicare recipients to access the health care they need."

"Our neighbors who need our help the most are often times the least aware that help exists. It's time to get the weight of a failing and inefficient system off of the backs of our seniors and people living with disabilities," said Doggett, a senior member of the House Ways and Means Committee. "Our bill not only ensures more seniors are eligible for the help they need, but it also identifies and notifies those who are entitled to extra help and makes it easier for them to get it. The bill will also curb waste, fraud, abuse, and help ensure that we get a full accounting of every Medicare Part D payment to insurance plans."

The Senate legislation, called the Medicare Financial Stability for Beneficiaries Act of 2009, would both simplify the process for enrolling in a Medicare programs designed to give seniors and Americans living with disabilities extra help, and expand the eligibility of these programs to include more Medicare recipients. In the House of Representatives, Congressman Doggett introduced the Prescription Coverage Now Act of 2009 to address the Medicare Part D program, and Congressman Becerra introduced the Medicare Savings Program Improvement Act of 2009 to address the MSP program.

Specifically, the bill would:

- Provide extra help to seniors to pay for outpatient services such as doctor visits, lab work, and preventative care including flu shots and cancer screenings by permanently extending one MSP – called Qualified Individual Program (QI-1) – that has in the past only been temporarily reauthorized for short periods of time.
- Get more help for Americans that need it the most by aligning the MSP and LIS programs. Right now, only Medicare beneficiaries with incomes of up to 135 percent of the federal poverty level – or \$1218 per month per individual -- qualify for low-income assistance under MSP, and up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level under Medicare Part D. Under the new legislation, individuals up to 150 percent of poverty could qualify for full benefits and individuals up to 200 percent of poverty could qualify for partial benefits.
- Increase efficiency and accessibility of these programs by making improvements to the MSPs and the Medicare Part D application process. The bill also seeks to simplify the process of applying for the MSPs by making the process more understandable to enrollees, as well as state and federal government officials.

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